

RHODE ISLAND ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND

Report of the Executive Director

1967 - 1968

Forty-two years ago, on November 17, 1925, the Rhode Island Association for the Blind was incorporated to serve blind persons and "provide them with opportunities for occupations, education, training and work in the arts, industries and business." Today, it is a major force not only in service to blind and visually handicapped persons, but in the health and welfare activity of Rhode Island as well. Nationally, it is also participating in promulgation of standards which will have far reaching effects on the quality of services provided blind and visually handicapped persons throughout the United States.

A brief resume of the developments between 1925 and 1967 will put into perspective the activities which are taking place today and the new directions which are emerging as a blueprint for future growth.

The very early beginnings of the Association are, for the present, lost. However, it is known that as early as 1904, there was an organization known as the Society of Hope for the Blind, established by the various church groups throughout Providence. Its main function was to conduct social hours and musicales. The minutes of the activities of this group are among Association records. Out of this, it is thought, the Rhode Island Association for the Promotion of the Interests of the Blind resulted. The work of this Association was the same as that of the Society of Hope with the addition of a workshop for chair reseating which was opened on Eddy Street, Providence. Records establish the fact that this organization was the forerunner of the present Association and that in 1925 the name of the organization was changed to the Rhode Island Association for the Blind at the time of the incorporation.

Through the interest and legislative activities of Association members and other interested citizens, the State of Rhode Island established the Rhode Island Bureau for the Blind in 1930. An Executive Secretary was hired who acted as the head of the State agency and the Association jointly. Until 1938, both organizations occupied the same offices and shared administrative, professional and clerical staffs as well as the financial responsibility for provision of services to Rhode Island Blind persons.

In 1938, the Association established its own independent offices and programs. These included casework services, entertainment and vacation programs, a shop with chair reseating and sewing units, a greeting card sales program and a homebound industry and sales program.

In 1959, the first major step toward an enlarged, more professionally oriented service for Rhode Island blind persons came with the inception of a low vision service, patterned after that successfully demonstrated by the Industrial Home for the Blind. The institution of this service was made possible by a grant for partial support from the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The Federal grant continued until November 30, 1963, since which time the Association has continued the service. The following statistics will illustrate that it is now recognized as a necessary and vital resource in the rehabilitation of both children and adults with residual vision. Since its inception, 425 persons have received assistance in the program. In 1967, clients made 565 visits to the service. At present, there are 186 persons active in the program. Each year, since its inception, there has been an average of 51 new persons who have been helped in the program.

By 1960, the Association realized it had increased its activities to an extent which caused it to be operating under the handicap of facilities which were inadequate and not functional. Existant staff was unable to meet demands for service. In 1961, after much deliberation, it was determined to request the American Foundation for the Blind to study Association programs, facilities and staff in light of total community needs and to recommend a long-term program of growth and change. It was known the Association had "grown like Topsy" and that recommendations might include discontinuance of some programs, extension of others and possible institution of additional services.

In 1962, the Foundation report was received. Today, all major recommendations have been implemented. Following receipt of the study, developments were as follows:

In 1963, the first professionally trained caseworker was added to staff. Today the Casework Department is the central intake department for total Agency services and employs a Director (ACSW), two caseworkers with Master of Social Work Degrees and a caseworker, who is a registered Social Worker in Rhode Island with twenty-five years experience. In 1967, 315 clients were provided casework and counselling services through 2,839 contacts.

Recognizing the need for blind persons to have opportunity to move about independently, a part-time mobility and orientation program was begun in 1963. In 1964, this program was increased to a full time activity partially supported by a Department of Health, Education and Welfare grant with one-full-time professionally trained peripatologist. In 1966, a second peripatologist was added to staff. Today the Association fully supports the program.

The mobility and orientation instructors teach blind persons to travel independently with safety through the use of a long cane and residual senses. To train a person to travel adequately in all kinds of settings requires an average of 120 hours of training. Individual sessions are approximately one and one-half hours long. In 1967, 68 clients were provided 643 lessons. Unfortunately, in August, the peripatologists resigned to accept other employment and since that time the Association has been unable to operate the service. There is a waiting list of clients which will require the service of two peripatologists for more than a year. Two new instructors have been hired from the class to graduate next month from Boston College. It is hoped their draft status can be cleared so they may give uninterrupted service.

In March, 1964, the present headquarters was located and provides the space which was necessary to enlarge and intensify Association service to Rhode Island blind persons. In February, 1965, the Association moved into the building which has 20,000 square foot of space, is centrally located, has twelve minute bus service to the center of Providence which is only a ten-minute ride, is within a quarter mile of Route 95, has parking for 125 cars, tail-gate dock loading facilities, is light, completely air conditioned and has one of the lowest fire insurance rates for a building of its kind in Providence.

The move to the new headquarters made possible the enlargement of the workshop with an emphasis on rehabilitation and training for industrial employment rather than being simply a place to work outside the home as its only value.

Extended workshop employment is provided for those not capable of employment in the community. The Workshop encompasses three departments - chair reseatng, sewing and sub-contract. It is staffed by a Workshop Director, a Chief Instructor, two Instructors and a Clerk. Priority to this point has been given to the sub-contract department which is being developed as a mechanized, automated facility with the intent on capitalizing on current trends in the industrial community. The sub-contract department solicits contracts from business and industry on a competitive basis in the areas of hand assembly, sorting, packaging, collating, foot-press and solonoid operations as well as drill press, lathe and heat sealing operations.

In 1967, 38 blind persons were provided work in the Workshop. Workers are paid the same piece work rate as is paid for similar work in industry, with their earnings being determined by their productivity. The Workshop operates under licences of both the Rhode Island and United States Departments of Labor. In 1967, clients were provided 29,155 hours of work and were paid \$28,757.95.

As the mobility and orientation instructors referred to above worked with clients (especially the congenitally blind) there resulted an awareness of the lack of certain basic concepts common to persons with vision and necessary for blind persons if they are to function adequately and travel safely. Without these it is not possible for blind persons to conceive what most sighted individuals take for granted. Consequently, it was realized it would be of inestimable value if a program could be provided for children (as a start) to train and reinforce their abilities in deficient areas. Finances were a problem. A request for a grant to support a one-week demonstration project was submitted to Seeing Eye, Inc. Fortunately, the request was approved. The results of the pilot project proved dramatically the value of the undertaking. This year (1968) Seeing Eye, Inc. is helping support a similar project for a four week period for sixteen children.

There will be five, fifty-minute classes per day including mobility and orientation, activities of daily living, physical education (plus daily swimming instruction), arts and crafts and hygiene. Each Friday the day will be extended to include an experience in an activity or socialization process in which members of the group have not often had prior independent experience. ie, a cookout and ocean swim, including cooking their own "hot dogs", a trip to a local park to handle and fondle animals and pets (rabbits, calves, fawn, etc.) bowling, a tactile tour of a museum, etc.

In the initial experiment referred to above, parents were instructed in an orientation period on the first day about program content and its aims and on the final day were provided a private evaluation of their child's accomplishments and needs. As a result, there was an awareness on the part of Association personnel of the desire and need for assistance on the part of parents of these children. Consequently, in October, 1967, the Association convened a meeting of the five agencies in Rhode Island providing services specifically for blind and visually handicapped children, to plan a series of meetings designed to give parents this assistance. The first of these sessions was held January 17, 1968. The subject was "Understanding Your Visually Handicapped Child". The second session was held May 24 with the meeting devoted to "Self-care, Socialization and Leisure-time Activities for your Visually Handicapped Child". The value, need and desire for further programs has led to the decision to conduct a similar series beginning in the fall of 1968.

To further augment and make more efficient use of professional staff, a part-time coordinator of volunteers has been added to staff to recruit and train volunteers to assist professional staff in giving needed assistance to

blind clients. This encompasses areas in which the professional competence of staff is not essential. However, Volunteers work under the supervision of the professional staff. In 1967, volunteer activities included motor corps service, reading, writing, transcribing into braille, typing large print materials, visiting, assistance with household activities, etc.

A part-time psychologist was also added to staff in 1967. He has assisted professional staff in its aim to more efficiently and effectively serve those clients who present more difficult and deep-seated problems. This is done through testing and counselling clients and consultation to staff persons.

One of the original programs instituted early in the activities of the Association was its Home-bound Program. Persons desiring to learn craft activities and earn income thereby, have been provided the opportunity to do so. The crafts are taught by two home teachers employed by the Division of Services for the Blind. The Association provides a person to bring materials and give instruction to those who become proficient in a craft and to conduct sales of this merchandise throughout the state. In 1967, 54 blind persons earned \$4,311.80. Upon close study it was realized the cost of the program was sizable and the earnings of most clients nominal. Consequently, the operation was carefully considered in terms of its value both financially and therapeutically for those who participate in it. As a result it has been determined that for a majority of those served, a substitute activity can possibly be arranged which will be equally meaningful for them. In some instances this can be arranged through similar activities carried on by other community agencies or through volunteer activities, recreational opportunities, etc. Consequently, it has been decided to gradually phase out the Homebound Program and to provide for the needs of its clients in the ways mentioned.

This has been a difficult decision to reach since the service has been a part of Association programs from almost its beginning, but it is realized that today, learning hand crafts is no longer of the same interest to people as it once was. In addition to this, it is becoming more and more difficult to compete with mass produced and imported items in the sales of these products. At the time the American Foundation for the Blind made its survey in 1962, it recommended the Association consider the feasibility of discontinuing this program. Until the present time, when costs are increasing at a more rapid pace than income and additional services are needed, which would reach a much larger segment of the blind population in a more effective manner, it was not necessary to come to this decision.

Recently, the Association has been approached and asked whether it would consider establishing a pre-school program for blind children. The Board of Directors has indicated its willingness to research the need, ascertain that no other agency contemplates establishing such a service and determine whether the Association is the proper location for such a facility. It will investigate the necessary components and the probable cost of the service. The American Foundation for the Blind is assisting in this study and if the service is needed and the Association should provide it, it will then seek the funds necessary for staff and equipment.

As indicated in the discussion of the summer program for children, there has been recognition of the need for opportunity for Rhode Island blind persons to be habilitated or rehabilitated to the activities of daily living with which they are faced. This includes such common, but essential tasks as eating, shaving, applying cosmetics, dialing the telephone, money differentiation, problems of hygiene, etc. A recent study by a national authority has identified more than 500 tasks a person must relearn when sight is lost. The Association is constantly exposed to pressure for such a service, but is faced with the practical problems of finances.

Throughout this relatively rapid growth of service to blind persons, the Association has been careful that it provided only services of a high caliber. It has been operating with the Seal of Good Practice of the American Association of Workers for the Blind which attests to the quality of its operations. As of December, 1967, the granting of this Seal of Good Practice was discontinued to make way for a more intense system of accreditation.

For the past three years a group of approximately one hundred persons from all parts of the country, expert both within and outside the field of work with blind persons have met and developed standards for accreditation of agencies serving blind and visually handicapped persons. This Association's Executive Director served on one of these committees and has been asked to be among approximately thirty persons who will serve in studying agencies seeking accreditation.

Concurrent with this development, the Association, two years ago, appointed an Agency Services Committee to study Association programs and operations in order to familiarize Board members in depth with Association activities so services could be improved and at the same time to prepare for self-evaluation which would be a necessary part of the accrediting process. In September, 1967, the Board of Directors voted to seek accreditation as soon as the

National Accreditation Council was ready to offer the service. In April, 1968, the Council notified agencies it was ready to begin its work and that the self-evaluation instruments were available. The Association immediately applied and its application was accepted. The Association was congratulated by the Council for being the first agency in the Northeast to apply.

It is hoped the self-evaluation can be completed by September and that the Association can be the first agency in the area to become accredited. This has more than prestige value. Just as one would not go to a hospital that is not accredited or send children to unaccredited schools, blind persons should be assured that services they are receiving are of highest quality and the public which supports the agency should be assured its monies are being spent most judiciously. In this day of purchase of service by governmental agencies from private agencies, accreditation will be the criteria by which the agencies from which service will be purchased will be determined. The Federal government has already stated its position in this regard.

As a corollary to the expansion and intensification of Association programs and activities, the Association has become an increasingly important force in the extension of opportunity for understanding and education concerning blindness, its effects, and in training those giving service to blind persons, both lay and professional. As instances of this activity, a seminar for a Teacher's Corps group was held. Several hospitals send nurse-trainees to the Vision Service as part of their in-service training and Association staff are increasingly called upon to work with individuals and groups of professional personnel of other agencies to help them in working with blind persons who need their assistance. Programs are provided for church and club groups to an ever increasing degree.

This review of Association growth and activity indicates where its work began, how it developed, the present status of programs and where it should move in the future. Behind all this activity has been a corps of dedicated Board members, Officers and staff, together with an understanding and generous public which has made possible the provision of these opportunities for Rhode Island blind and visually handicapped persons to become independent, contributing members of the community. However, what has been accomplished to date must only serve as the basis for enlarged, more meaningful and effective service in the future. To each who has contributed to this growth, I wish to thank you on behalf of those who have benefitted by Association services, however, I also wish to ask your continued interest

and support because in this day of competition and growing complexity within our society, blind persons need opportunity to become independent to an extent even greater than now possible.

Helen W. Worden
Executive Director

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